

The Correspondence of Robert Boyle

The publication of 'The Correspondence of Robert Boyle' in six volumes in August 2001 represents the triumphant completion of the project – conceived in 1989 and adopted as a British Academy Research Project in 1996 – for an edition of all extant letters to and from the scientist, religious writer and philanthropist, Robert Boyle (1627–91).

Professor Michael Hunter, director of the project, describes the work.

The edition has been produced by an international team comprising Michael Hunter (Birkbeck College, University of London), Antonio Clericuzio (University of Cassino) and Lawrence M. Principe (Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore) as editors, with David Money (Wolfson College, Cambridge) as Latin advisor, and with the help of various research assistants supported by grants from the British Academy and the Arts and Humanities Research Board, notably Ben Coates, Rosalind Davies and Sara Pennell. In addition, a major role has been played by the publishers, Pickering & Chatto, and particularly the production director there, Jessica Cuthbert-Smith, who has worked closely with the editors to produce as attractive and user-friendly a format for the edition as possible.

The appearance of *The Correspondence of Robert Boyle* brings to fruition a long process of locating, transcribing, annotating and checking the texts of Boyle's entire surviving correspondence. This has involved visits to locations as far-flung as Leiden, Florence, Boston (Massachusetts) and Hartford (Connecticut), though by far the bulk of the letters are in England, and especially at the Royal Society, where Boyle's papers were deposited in the mid-eighteenth century. Our aim has been to provide an accurate text of all the letters, derived from the best early sources, manuscript where available, printed where not. At the outset, we were fortunate in being able to build on the work on Boyle's correspondence of earlier scholars, notably the late R.E.W. Maddison, who transcribed many hitherto unpublished letters with a grant from the Leverhulme Trust in 1962–4, and A.R. and M.B. Hall, who included all the letters between Boyle and Oldenburg in their monumental edition of *The Correspondence of Henry Oldenburg* (1965–86). These texts were optically scanned, as were other letters published in modern editions, while a transcription of the letters of the intelligencer, Samuel Hartlib, to Boyle was kindly provided by the Hartlib Papers Project at Sheffield. In these and all other cases, the texts were rechecked against the original manuscript and/or printed versions both

at the copy-editing stage and in proof. In fact, it is gratifying to be able to record that the proofs of the entire edition were checked against the original sources between November 2000 and June 2001, a heroic task executed by Sara Pennell, Harriet Knight, Lien Bich Luu and Michael Hunter. Meanwhile, the annotations and apparatus were being scrutinised and a glossary and two elaborate indexes compiled – one an index to all the letters in the edition, the other a general index – which should enhance the edition's value.

In conception, *The Correspondence of Robert Boyle* is a sequel to the fourteen-volume edition of his *Works* produced by Michael Hunter in collaboration with Edward B. Davis in fourteen volumes and published by Pickering & Chatto in 1999–2000. This includes such epoch-making experimental treatises as Boyle's *New Experiments, Touching the Spring of the Air, and its Effects* (1660) and the other forty-odd works by him published during or shortly after his lifetime, together with a selection of his writings that have hitherto survived only in manuscript. The two editions exactly match each other in format, and they exemplify common editorial principles, seeking to provide a complete, accurate and fully annotated text of the writings that they present. Both are intended to replace the edition of *The Works of Robert Boyle* brought out by the divine and antiquary, Thomas Birch, in 1744, the final volume of which contained the largest selection of Boyle's letters to be published hitherto, on which scholars have long relied.

Now, Birch's edition has been comprehensively superseded. For one thing, the new edition includes over twice as many letters as Birch's. In addition, whereas Birch's selection was almost exclusively of letters in English, *The Correspondence of Robert Boyle* includes large numbers of letters in Latin and French, along with smaller numbers in Italian, Dutch, German and Spanish and even an acrostic addressed to Boyle in Greek. These are accompanied by a parallel English translation on the same page. In addition, all the letters are fully annotated, with all individuals, books and events referred to in them being identified in footnotes. The letters are also provided with a complete apparatus in which all addresses and endorsements

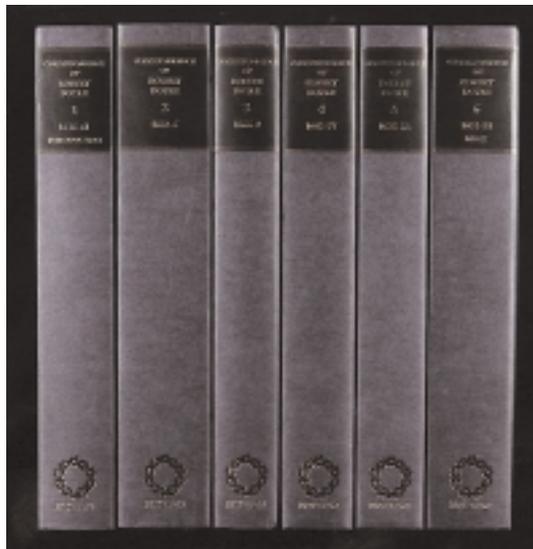




Figure 1. Seals on letters from Boyle in *Early Letters B1, 90* (top) and 99. By permission of the President and Council of the Royal Society

are transcribed and all postmarks and seals recorded. The latter are a feature of epistolary exchange in the period that has often been overlooked in editions of correspondence, yet they provide significant information. In Boyle's case, for instance, he used a variety of seals, not only heraldic ones but also classical motifs and symbolic devices such as a *memento mori* showing a skeleton with an hour glass.

Another unusual feature of the edition is its record, not just of letters to or from Boyle that survive, but of letters which are known once to have existed but are now lost. This is based on inventories made by various earlier students of the correspondence: Birch himself and his collaborator, the nonconformist minister Henry Miles, and their predecessor, the scholar William Wotton, who made extensive preparations for a 'Life' of Boyle which never materialised. (A full account of this enterprise is provided in Michael Hunter's earlier *Robert Boyle by Himself and his Friends* (1994), in which the one extant chapter is printed along with other early biographical material relating to Boyle.) The lists made by these

scholars include a shockingly high proportion of letters which are no longer extant: this was apparently due to a combination of negligence and censorship, almost certainly on the part of Birch and Miles, who marked many of them 'No Worth' or with related formulae. Some of the discarded letters may have seemed trivial – letters concerning the administration of Boyle's estates, for instance, or begging letters – but some seem to have been deliberately suppressed in an attempt to protect Boyle's reputation, notably letters from alchemists, religious radicals and others. Thus we have been able to record a number of letters to Boyle from the Quaker and friend of Locke, Benjamin Furly, or from such shadowy alchemists as Christopher Kirkby, one-time laboratory assistant to Charles II. By quoting the brief notes that survive on these items at the appropriate chronological point in the series, we hope that we have provided a more balanced view of Boyle's correspondence than would otherwise be the case.

Figure 2. Portrait of Robert Boyle by Johann Kerseboom, c.1689. This portrait, which recently came to light in a private collection in Ireland, is a gift of John Haas and Eugene Garfield, Chemical Heritage Foundation, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania



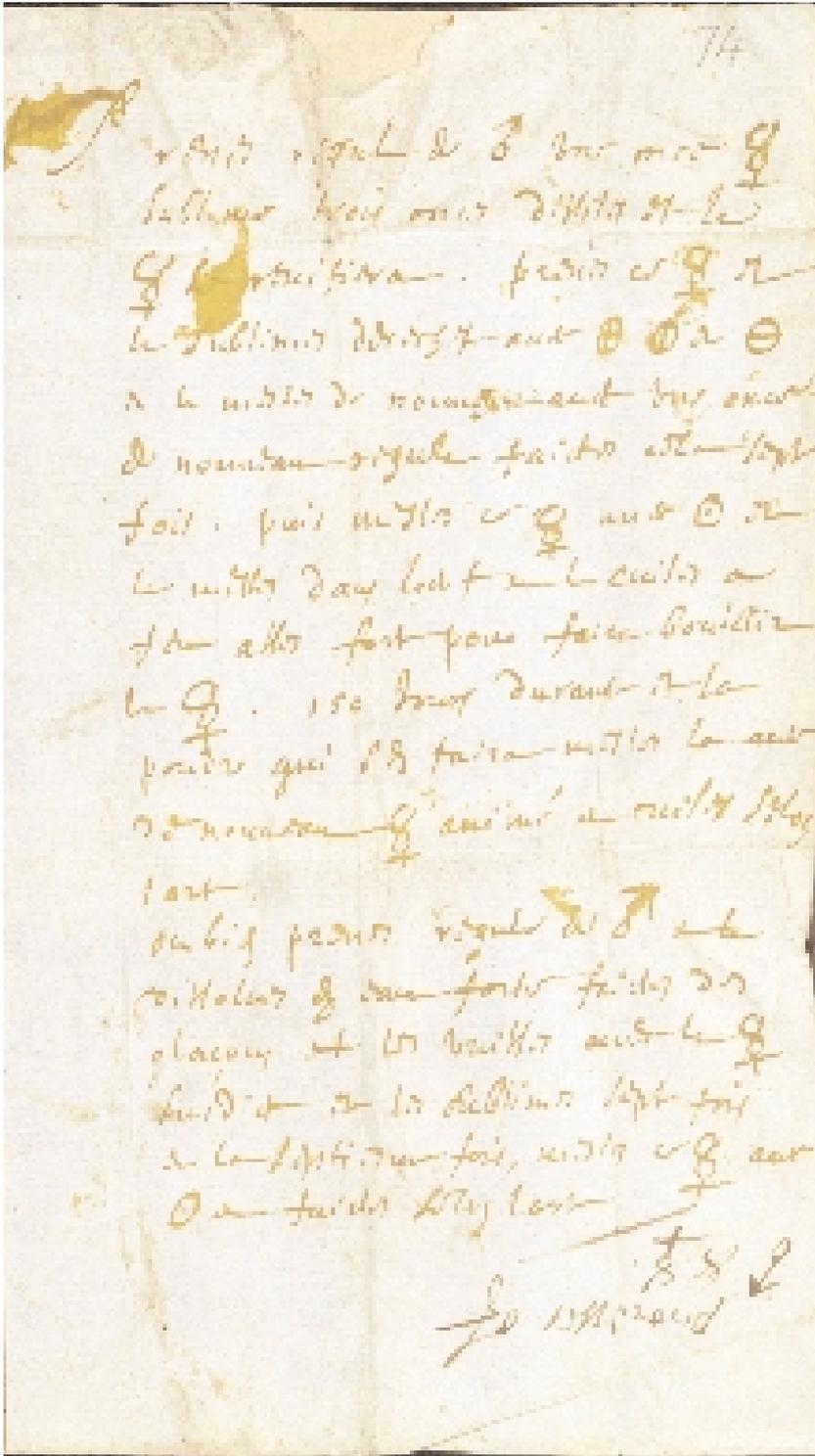


Figure 3. An alchemical recipe enclosed with a letter from Georges Pierre de Closets to Boyle (for a transcription and translation see *Correspondence v*, 13–14). *Boyle Letters 6*, fol. 74. By permission of the President and Council of the Royal Society

Fortunately, Birch and Miles' obtuseness towards Latin and French letters means that the new edition is able to print many comparable letters in full, perhaps notably a long series of letters to Boyle from the French alchemist, Georges Pierre de Closets, in the late 1670s, when Boyle was

encouraged to join an arcane alchemical confraternity, an invitation to which he seems to have been quite receptive. As a result, this aspect of Boyle's intellectual activities is far more fully documented by the new edition than hitherto.

It also extends the coverage of Birch's edition in relation to almost all Boyle's other activities – his family life, his relations with savants in England and abroad, and his role in encouraging the propagation of Christianity throughout the world by biblical translations and missionary activity. Apart from piecemeal additions, an important series of letters is here published for the first time from Boyle to Narcissus Marsh, Provost of Trinity College, Dublin, relating to the publication of the Irish translation of the Bible which Boyle sponsored.

But, as users of the new edition will soon find, the corpus of Boyle's correspondence is overall transformed by the new edition. Quite apart from the extra letters that are included and the extensive notes provided, the other great difference from Birch's edition is that, whereas his selection of letters was arranged in order of correspondent, here all letters to and from Boyle, both extant and lost, are arranged in a single chronological sequence. Readers are thus presented with the Boyle's activities as they were actually juxtaposed, with letters to his siblings concerning litigation side by side with formal missives from continental savants, letters from his ecclesiastical confidants and arcane alchemical texts. It should prove an invaluable tool for all students of Boyle and of the intellectual and religious culture of late seventeenth-century England and Europe for years to come, and a worthy example of the benefits of the British Academy's sponsorship.

As a postscript, it is perhaps worth adding that, though the edition is currently available only in printed form, an electronic edition of it will shortly be available from InteLex, as part both of their 'Past Masters' series (in conjunction with *The Works of Robert Boyle* and *Robert Boyle by Himself and his Friends*), and of their series, '1000 Years of English Letters'.

Publication details can be found at www.pickeringchatto.com. For information on the electronic edition, see www.nlx.com

For information on the ongoing work of the Boyle Project from which all these editions have emanated, see the Boyle web site at www.bbk.ac.uk/Boyle